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Fair Access to English Higher Education in the 21st Century – A Story in 5 Parts

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Fair Access to English Higher Education in the 21st Century – A Story in 5 Parts

(2021 CGHE Annual Conference keynote¹)

Chris Millward

Chris Millward is the first Director for Fair Access and Participation in the Office for Students (OfS). His role is to ensure that universities and colleges are doing all they can to support underrepresented groups to access and succeed in higher education. Chris is also an executive member of the OfS board.

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Abstract

During the 21st century to date, governments in England have positioned access to higher education centrally within meritocratic policies aiming to improve equality of opportunity. This has been pursued by: increasing the number of university places and sharing the cost of this with students once they have graduated; providing funding to universities to conduct outreach with schools, create pathways through further education colleges and support students on course; and requiring universities to provide financial support to the poorest students and set targets for improving access through regulated plans.

This session, which took place at the 2021 CGHE Annual Conference, considers how these interventions have influenced patterns of access to higher education in England and it will anticipate further changes to policy during the coming years.

¹ This is a transcript of the keynote that Chris Millward planned to give at Day 1 of the sixth annual conference of the Centre for Global Higher Education held online on 11 & 12 May 2021.

In doing so, it will tell a story in five parts, covering: the period until 2006 when widening participation was funded by government grant; the introduction of up to £3k fees and the establishment of an access regulator from 2006; the increase of tuition fees to £9k from 2012 and the aim to position students at the heart of the system; the establishment of the Office for Students as the regulator of higher education, including access and participation, from 2018; and the prospects for the period until 2025 as higher education in England recovers from the coronavirus pandemic.

I am the Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students (OfS), which is the regulator of higher education in England. This is a statutory role in place since 2017, building on the work of previous Directors for Fair Access.

I have worked in English higher education for 25 years, including in universities, a Research Council and for a decade prior to this job at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the predecessor to OfS, with regional and then national policy responsibilities.

I will talk in a personal capacity during this session about how policy and practice relating to fair access and widening participation – the goal to increase the number of people entering higher education and make all universities, including the most selective, more representative of the wider population – developed during this period, the extent to which it succeeded, and where it may go next.

A story in five parts

I have labelled this a story in five parts, reflecting the changes to funding and regulation across the period, punctuated by independent reviews, white papers and legislation.

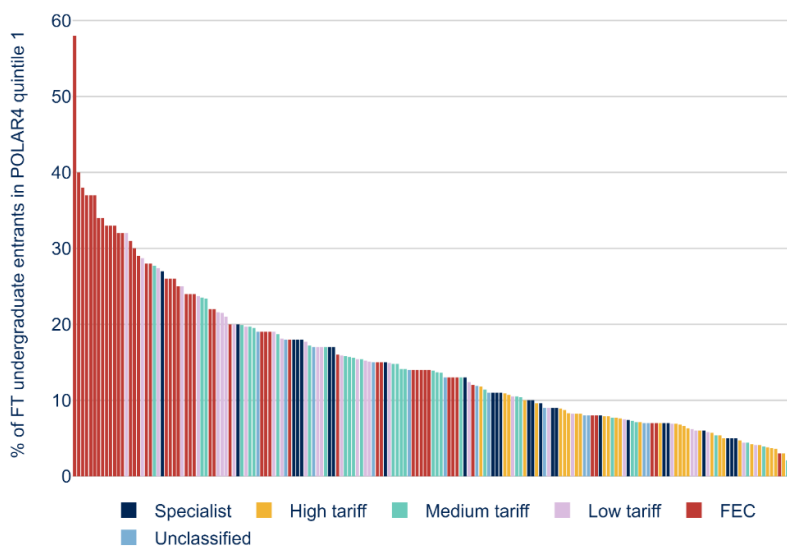
- In the first part of the century, government grant to universities and a small student contribution helps to finance widening participation by increasing places, then is given momentum by the commitment to a 50% participation rate for young people.
- In the second part, there is an increase to the contribution made by graduates from 2006, albeit through income-contingent loans, together with a more activist approach to reaching underrepresented people and places, and a fair access regulator to avoid them being disadvantaged.

- In the third part, following the global banking crash and a change of government, there is more radical cost sharing with graduates from 2012, together with the strengthening of measures to support the most disadvantaged students, and to empower student choice and demand.
- In the fourth part, legislation in 2017 establishes the regulatory architecture for a student-led system, shifting from funding body oversight to a regulated register of providers, with an access and participation plan as the first condition of registration.
- And now in the fifth part, a potential shift in the consensus that has governed policy towards increasing participation in higher education during the century to date, with a focus on levelling up opportunities, whichever route is followed through post-compulsory education.

There are also the five features you should find in any good story:

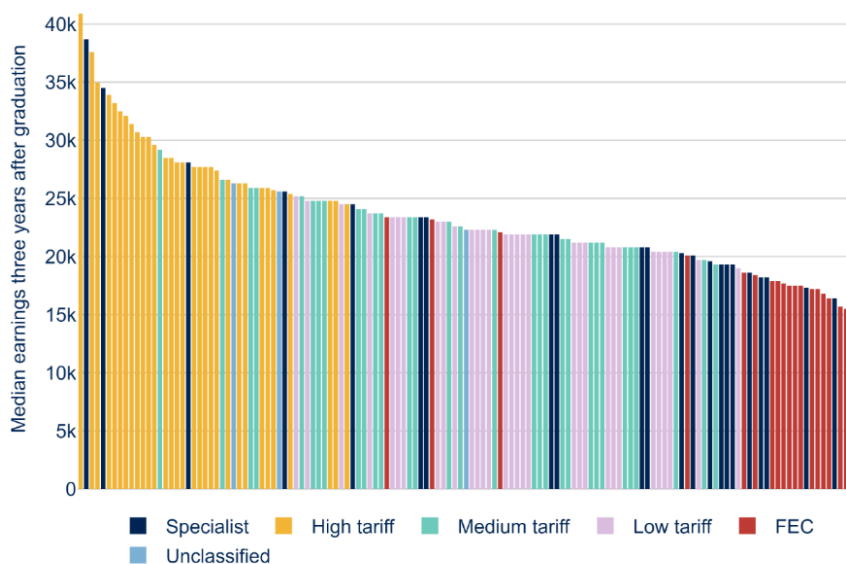
- Setting – the English higher education system, fixed in the minds of the nation and the world around our ancient collegiate universities, which still channel much of our elite. Despite expansion and diversification, to the extent that more than half of current graduates now study and work where they grow up, university in England is still widely perceived as residential, academic and elite, indeed this is part of its global appeal. It is also highly stratified, with the most prestigious and research-intensive universities, which lead to the most highly paid and prestigious jobs, recruiting the lowest proportions of disadvantaged students, as shown in Tables 1 and 2 below. This itself reflects a particularly strong relationship between social background and school grades, and school grades and university admissions – an ‘efficient sorting system’ as one researcher told me.

Table 1 – Institutional distribution of students from low participation neighbourhoods



Source: Internal OfS(DFA) analysis of HESA Performance Indicators 2016-17

Table 2 – Institutional distribution of median earnings three years after leaving a degree course



Source: DfE published LEO data. Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/graduate-outcomes-leo-subject-by-provider-2017-to-2018>

- Character – politicians, vice chancellors, student unions and review bodies have all shaped the debate around the changes I am describing. But the most important characters for me are students and their families, who have increasingly aspired to go to university and get a degree, despite the increasing cost to them over time, indeed the most prosperous families and schools have done all they can to sustain their hold over the most selective universities and courses. Alongside this, people who have not been to university have become increasingly influential through the ballot box.
- Conflict – between students, universities and government over fee levels, and between the identity and values of graduates and non-graduates, and the places where they tend to live.
- Plot – the pursuit of increasing higher education participation in the belief that it would create a more fair and open society, an education-based meritocracy enabling social mobility, and thereby life chances to be determined by ability rather than background.
- Theme – that in liberal societies like England, within which there is choice for students and families within the education system, higher education expansion will not reduce inequality and perceptions of fairness on its own. Other measures are needed to equalise opportunities, both in and beyond higher education. These measures need to bridge the divisions between higher and further education, academic and vocational education, graduates and the wider population, and the places where they live.

Part 1 – widening participation

At the turn of the century, a relatively new government aims to widen participation by increasing places in higher education, a progressive policy accompanied by a step that previous governments had avoided: a £1,000 up front contribution by students towards the cost of their studies. This is given momentum by the then Prime

Minister's 2001 commitment to increase higher education participation to 50% among young people in England. Speaking in 2001, he proclaims 'a society that is open and genuinely based on merit and the equal worth of all... I want to achieve a university participation rate of over 50 per cent among the under-30s... There will be no quotas; no lowering of entry standards. It is a strictly meritocratic programme.' Few working in higher education will disagree with the ambition to increase and indeed widen participation. But the speech raises some questions, for example whether 'entry standards' are synonymous with 'merit' and whether increasing higher education participation on this basis will indeed yield a society 'based on merit', within which your background does not hold you back. Also, what are the consequences of such a society for those who do not meet the entry standard – who are not able, or indeed do not want to capitalise on equality of opportunity and social mobility through higher education – which in this vision would be half the young population, let alone the existing adult population. And, whatever the entry standard, what about the exit standard and how to pay for it?

Part 2 – building pathways

A White Paper in 2004, enacted from 2006, puts substance behind this vision, and it is worth noting its explanation of how further expansion is intended to be achieved. This is not through full-time degree level study in universities, but pathways through further education colleges, flexible and part-time learning, and shorter foundation degrees designed with employers. Tuition fees would be increased to up to £3,000, but would not be paid up front. An access regulator would be established to agree plans for supporting the poorest students.

This last measure proves crucial to negotiating the increased fee through parliament, given the assumption that the poorest students could be put off by the new fee levels, particularly for the most selective courses. It is an important step, with lasting consequences, but does not in my view encroach substantially on universities. It focuses on bursaries rather than admissions and access, rather than the quality and experience on course. The new Director of Fair Access is charged, as I am now, with

protecting academic freedom in relation to admissions, so the pursuit of fairness in the job title has some constraints. A sector-led review of admissions proposes cautious consideration of the context in which grades have been achieved, and only in borderline cases. So 'merit', for the most part, still means entry grades.

Some of the more interesting work involves re-shaping higher education and taking it to new places. New universities are established in rural counties like Suffolk, Cornwall and Cumbria, and higher education centres in industrial and coastal towns like Burnley, Grimsby and Southend. Collaboration between further and higher education is central to this, supported by lifelong learning networks agreeing progression pathways at course level. There is also reflection on regional coherence and differential missions in places like the North East and the East of England, with the aim for progression through different types of higher education and potentially breaking the link between social and geographical mobility. More radical change would, though, require stronger funding incentives or less autonomy, and any such ideas are overtaken by events.

Part 3 – unlocking demand

Following the banking crash in 2008, there is a short period of activism to combat recession, with higher education moving to a new business ministry, and increased investment in graduate internships and jobs. But the establishment of a review panel before the 2010 election signals a further re-balancing of the contributions made by graduates and the state. The review is focused on the sustainability of higher education and – with a new coalition government focused on cutting the deficit from 2010 – it switches £3 billion of teaching grant into repayable student loans to cover fees of up to £9,000. This enables continued expansion through the removal of student number controls, whilst sustaining the investment in higher education at a time when most other parts of the education system and the public sphere experience cuts.

Facing backlash from students on the streets around parliament, the government's 2011 White Paper promises to position them 'at the heart of the system', with better information and new providers – 'the tide that lifts all boats' – enabling their needs and choices to drive provision. Government also increases the size, if not the powers, of the access regulator and it expects a proportionate increase in spending in this area to accompany the increase in fees.

Notwithstanding this, it is increasingly clear that, although bursaries and scholarships improve the experience of the poorest students, reducing their need to work alongside their studies for example, they have little effect on the patterns of demand, and thereby access to higher education. Neither students nor most providers spend much time considering differential fees. The real cost to the student is their immediate living expenses and the re-payment of their loans as a proportion of their future salary.

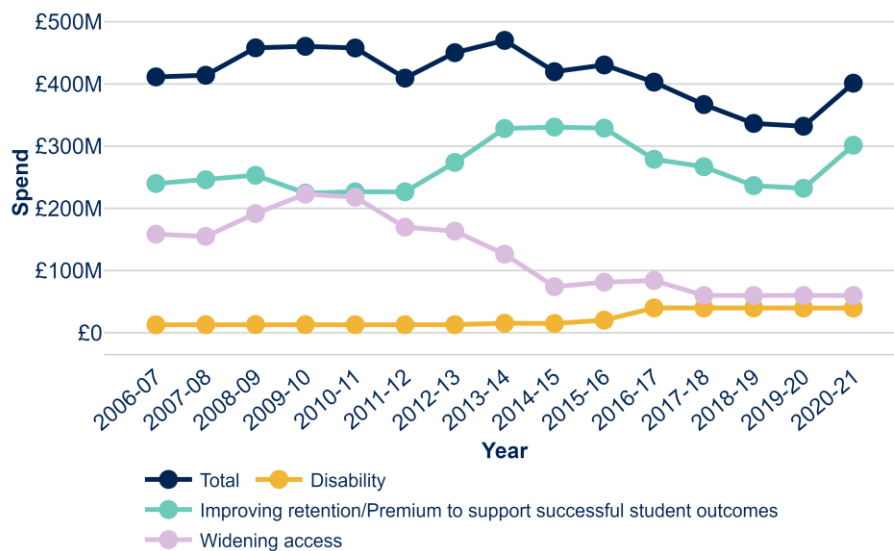
Admissions decisions remain beyond the powers of the access regulator and there is still a strong correlation between social background and entry grades. So, with access spending needing to increase, policy and practice shifts towards university outreach, equipping students with the understanding, appetite and, it is hoped, the grades needed to succeed.

Patterns of participation

It may be helpful to pause at this point to consider how these policy developments influenced patterns of participation in higher education, as set out below.

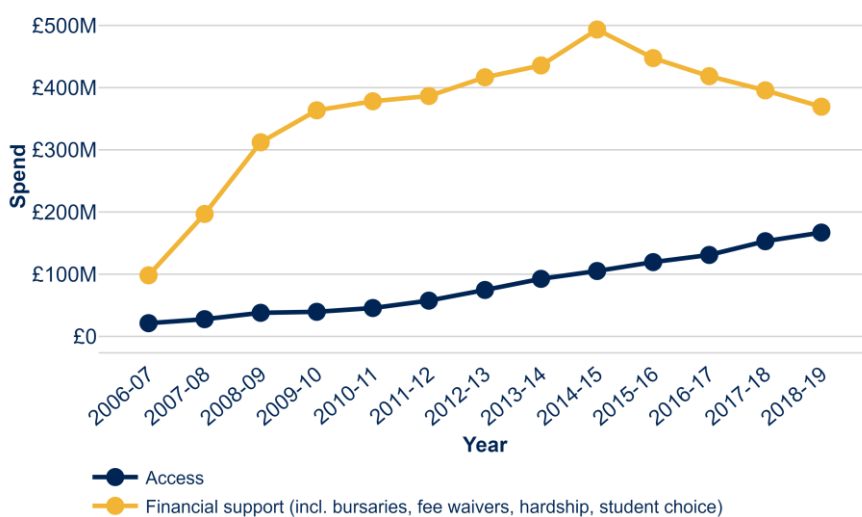
The first point to note is that spending on fair access and widening participation grew substantially during the period. The grant paid to universities for fair access and widening participation was maintained across the period, shown in Table 3 below, and universities' own investment, shown in Table 4, increased. Table 4 also shows how spending shifted from bursaries to outreach towards the end of the period.

Table 3 – Funding to universities for fair access and widening participation since 2006-07



Source: Hefce and OfS data, published each year.

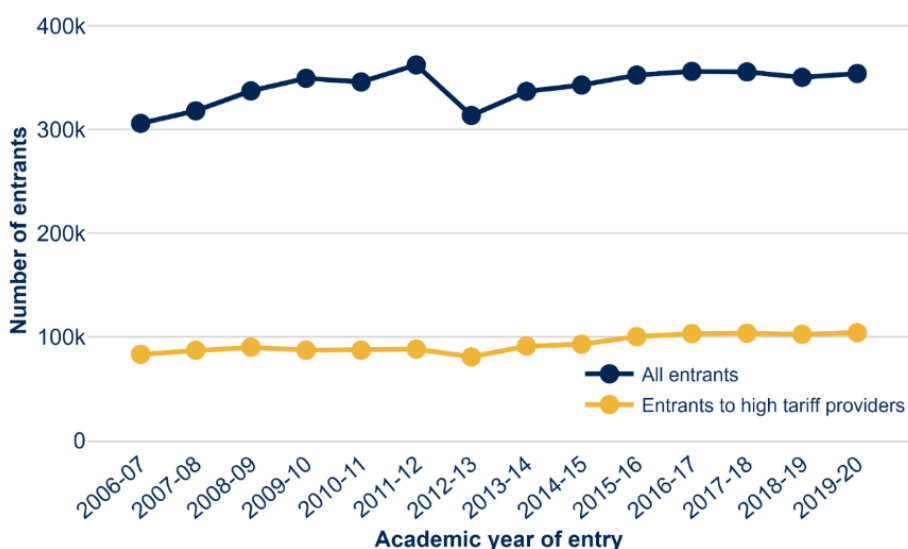
Table 4 – Investment by universities and colleges in fair access and widening participation since 2006-07



Source: OFFA access agreements and associated monitoring 2006-08 to 2018-19.

This investment, coupled with the measures to increase places I have described, enabled substantial expansion of young entrants to higher education, as shown in Table 5 below. There is a small dip in the year of the 2012 fee increase, but this can be ascribed to a bulge in the previous year as students sought to avoid the new fee.

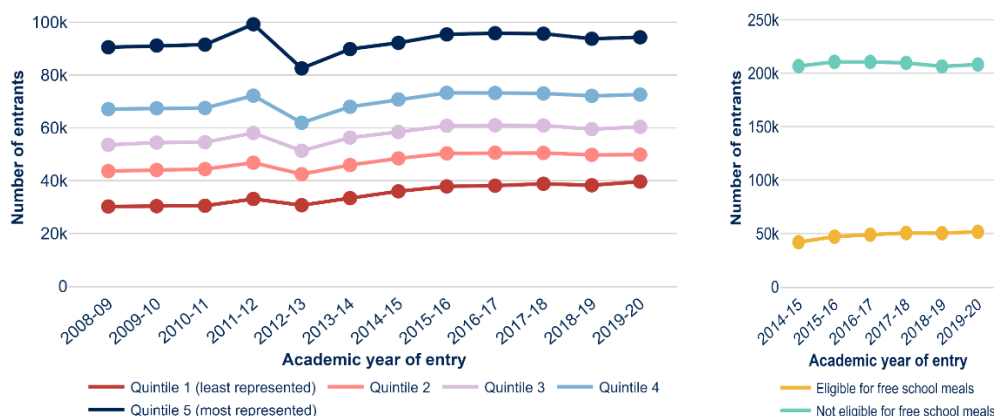
Table 5 – UK domiciled young entrants since 2006-07



Source: OfS analysis of HESA data, UK institutions

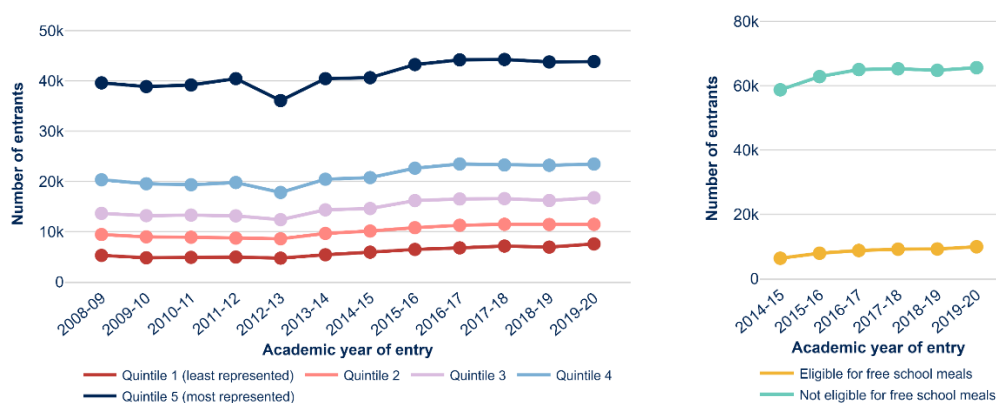
The increase applied to all groups of students, so the gap between the most and least represented groups – whether it is considered in terms of the neighbourhood in which where they grew up, or an income-based measure such as eligibility for free school meals – changed little. This is clear from Tables 6 and 7 below, which also show how the gap is much larger in the high tariff universities.

Table 6 – Entrants from low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR 4) or eligible for free school meals



Source: OfS analysis of NPD, HESA and ILR, English institutions. Young students only (under 21). Data on free school meal eligibility is only available from 2014-15 onwards.

Table 7 – Entrants from low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR 4) or eligible for free school meals – high tariff providers only

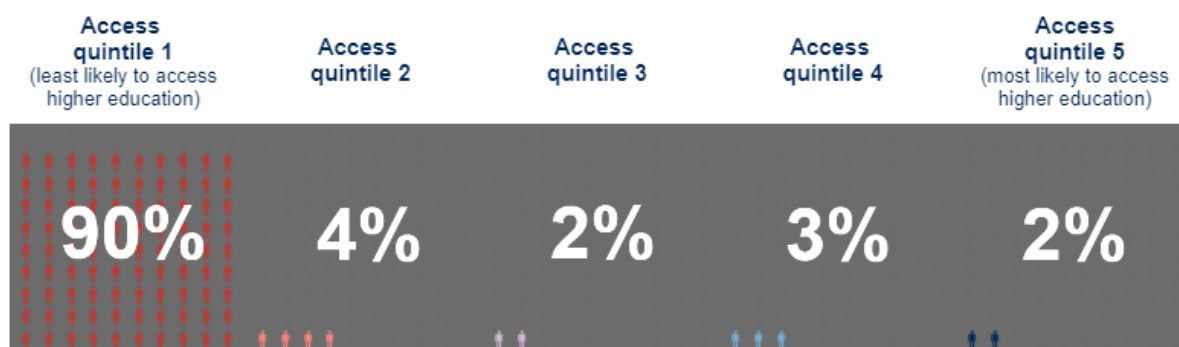


Source: OfS analysis of NPD, HESA and ILR data, English institutions. Young students only. Data on free school meal availability is only available for entrants from 2014-15 onwards.

When we combine these factors through an Associations Between Characteristics (ABCs) measure, as shown in Table 8 below, we have been able to identify that 90% of students who are eligible for free school meals and from the lowest participation neighbourhoods, which are mostly found in industrial towns and parts of cities across the north and midlands, and coastal towns, are in the quintile with the lowest levels of access to higher education. These people and places have benefited little from the

expansion of higher education and the increasing flow of graduates into the workforce.

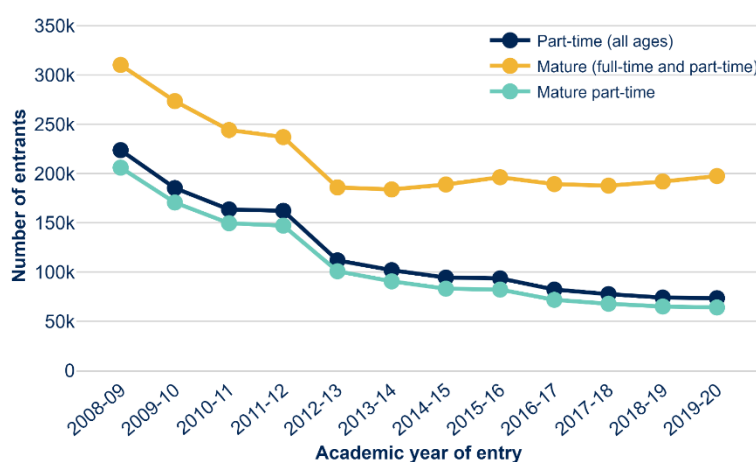
Table 8 – Associations Between Characteristics – Access



Source: OfS analysis of NPD, HESA and ILR data, English institutions. Young students only. Data on free school meal availability is only available for entrants from 2014-15 onwards.

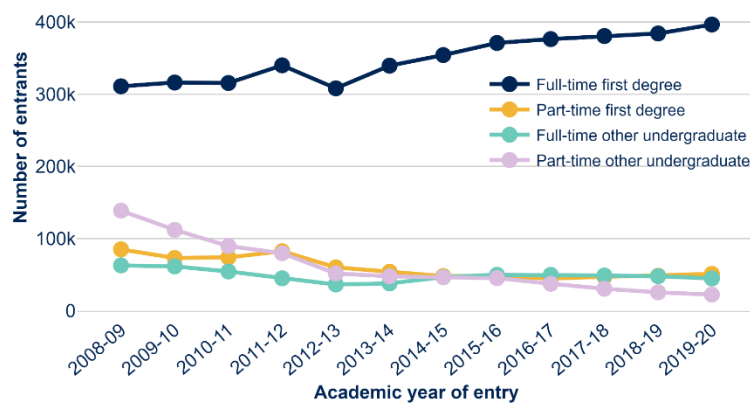
The figures I have presented all relate to young entrants, but one consequence of the demand-led system has been a decline in more flexible modes of study, whether part-time study or below degree level, which is more frequently sought by adults who are in work or have caring responsibilities. This is clear from Tables 9 and 10 below, which show a dramatic reduction in part-time mature students and part-time ‘other’ undergraduate study, which are courses below a full degree.

Table 9 – Mature student numbers since 2008-09



Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data

Table 10 – Level of undergraduate study since 2006-07



Source: OfS analysis of HESA and ILR data.

Note that in this chart any undergraduate courses with a postgraduate component have been included with the first degree courses.

Part 4 – regulating providers

This is the backdrop to the work I am doing now, which flows from legislation enacted in 2017.

The vision of reform over the previous 5 years had always included changes to the funding council to enable regulatory oversight of the majority share of the public investment in students and teaching, which is now channelled through government-backed loans.

But there is increasing recognition by this time that the measures I described in the 2011 White Paper – better information for students, new providers and greater competition, more access spending – are insufficient to meet the public policy goals: quality and value for money, for example, and equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle.

This is the basis for establishing the OfS as a regulator, acting in the interests of students. As the government takes the bill through parliament, there is substantial

debate on the strength of access regulation, which is to be merged into the new body. Its response, through the Minister to the Public Bill Committee in 2016, is that universities have a 'vital role in promoting social mobility' and 'the integration of the Director for Fair Access into the OfS signals our commitment to making fair access and participation a priority'.

OfS starts work at the beginning of 2018 and lays before parliament an outcomes-based regulatory framework. If they want to charge higher fees, universities are required to have an approved access and participation plan as the first condition of registration. The plans aim to make real progress in relation to outcomes, in terms of reducing inequality throughout the student lifecycle, rather than regulating inputs such as levels of spending and access to higher education alone. There is also a stronger focus on evaluation and understanding 'what works'.

There is a re-thinking of 'merit', which has been central to the language around higher education expansion. This recognises that fair equality of opportunity requires everyone to have a realistic chance of achievement, but the strength of the relationship between social background, school attainment and university admissions in England is a real barrier to that; also that equality of opportunity at one stage of education is worth little if there are new frontiers at the next.

With this in mind, we have negotiated significant commitments from universities to improve access and student success over the next five years. This can be seen already through changes to offer making patterns and long-standing differences in student outcomes.

Part 5 – levelling up

As we enter the 2020s, the consequences of increasing higher education participation are subject to new levels of scrutiny, due to what has been called 'populism' or 'a revolt against liberal democracy'. In UK, US and Europe, people who

are not graduates, often living in communities that were founded on blue-collar jobs, have been demonstrating their power through the ballot box.

Writers from quite different perspectives – Michael Sandel and Daniel Markovits in US, and David Goodhart and Selina Todd in England – have shown how the pursuit of equality of opportunity, social mobility and ultimately meritocracy by expanding higher education has diminished the prospects and standing of people who do not go to university, polarising graduates and non-graduates, knowledge and skills, cities and towns.

In England, the government's majority gained in 2019 is built on a promise to level up the opportunities in different parts of the country, particularly between towns of the post-industrial north and midlands, where there are the least graduates, and London and the South East, where there are the most. This has become an even sharper issue during the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit the poorest people and communities hardest, both in terms of their health and their children's education, whilst graduates appear to have been sheltered due to the flexibility of their knowledge, skills and working patterns.

There is now less focus on achieving social mobility by helping more disadvantaged young people into university and more on social justice by improving the prospects for everyone, whichever route they take through post-compulsory education. As set out in the Prime Minister's speech on this last September, more people will be encouraged to take higher technical qualifications below degree level designed with employers, to study whilst they are in work later in life, and to go from further education directly into skilled jobs where they have grown up and live.

In support of this, there will be quite radical change to the way in which post-compulsory education is financed, through a lifelong learning entitlement to be implemented by 2025. This will provide four years of finance for any level of study, at any time of life, potentially in smaller chunks than before, with the intention of levelling up the incentives between further and higher education.

This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the patterns I have described: the continued dominance of the young, full-time, full-degree model and the very low levels of higher education participation in post-industrial towns across the north and midlands, and coastal towns.

In order to succeed, it will need to meet the aspirations of young people and their families, the recruitment patterns of employers, and the needs of future jobs. It needs also to avoid entrenching the divisions between academic and vocational routes, which tend to follow attainment in school and thereby social background.

That means universities must be central to the vision, working with further education colleges and bridging between academic and vocational education, not just the route that is discouraged. If universities bring their subject expertise, their relationships with businesses and public services, and their global partnerships, students will want to take these routes and employers will want to employ them, enabling everyone, when they are ready and they want it, to stretch their learning as far as they can.